

The Anthropology of Childhood: Cherubs, Chattel, Changelings. David F. Lancy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2008. ix+466 pp.

Reviewed by:

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In a 2002 article, provocatively titled, “Why Don’t Anthropologists Like Children?” Lawrence Hirschfield argues that anthropologists have curiously marginalized children within their ethnographic accounts (2002: 611). David Lancy’s *The Anthropology of Childhood: Cherubs, Chattel, Changelings*, began as a refutation of Hirschfield’s accusation. Lancy remarks that, as someone who had devoted his career to the study of childhood, he was personally affronted (2008: ix). He notes that, unlike Hirschfield, he found no difficulty in finding dozens of accounts of childhood in the ethnographic record. Why were others not aware of this “treasure trove” of material? Lancy’s suggestion is that this is due to the balkanization of the field in which “Anthropologists who study schools [...] may not pay much attention to the work of ethnographers studying children learning to farm or hunt. Anthropologists looking at language socialization; archaeologists studying mortuary practices; biobehavioral anthropologists studying fertility – these and numerous lines of inquiry run in parallel, rarely crossing” (2008: ix). This text is thus determinedly holistic in its approach, aiming to dismantle artificial disciplinary divides and presenting a comprehensive overview of the anthropological study of childhood.

The book is innovatively structured around a consideration of the child as cherub, changeling or chattel. As Lancy notes, “Our society views children as precious, innocent and preternaturally cute cherubs. However for much of human history, children have been seen as anything but cherubic. I will introduce readers to societies, indeed entire periods in history, where children were viewed as unwanted, inconvenient changelings or as desired but pragmatically commoditized chattels” (2008:x).

The book is a significant contribution to the field. Furthermore, it is warm, incredibly engaging, and marvelously comprehensive – the bibliography alone is invaluable. It is also a great teaching text. Last semester in a class, “Childhood in Cross-Cultural Context” I paired the text with a monograph, Alma Gottlieb’s *The Afterlife is Where We Come From* (2004). Students loved both books and the pairing led to lively class discussion, for example on the cultural particularity of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and to thoughtful reflection on the privileged peculiarities of their own childhoods. Indeed several students remarked that these were the only books from the semester that they wouldn’t be selling back to the school bookstore!

While there is no doubt in the value of a holistic approach, at points I struggled with the integration of evolutionary and cultural perspectives within the text. For example, in a discussion of violence against children, Lancy draws on a newspaper article from the Salt Lake Tribune. It details the physical abuse inflicted on a two-year-old girl by her mother’s boyfriend. The account is presented alongside examples of the aggression of pandas and the actions of blue-footed booby chicks pushing their weaker

siblings from crowded Galapagos island nests (2008: 41-42). The resulting juxtaposition suggests a reductive biological determinism that sits awkwardly with the far more nuanced engagement offered in later chapters. For example, in the final chapter “Suffer the Children” Lancy engages compassionately with complex dynamics of structurally reinforced inequality and of societal change which shape the lives of many children, yet such analysis is near absent from early chapters. It is noticeable too that while Lancy’s examples from cultural anthropology include the full scope from classic ethnographic literature to recent research, he draws on a rather older and more populist literature when presenting evolutionary perspectives (i.e. Dawkin’s *The Selfish Gene*). At times the disconnection between the forms of analysis is disconcerting and the biological determinist sections seem to dehumanize, something deeply at odds with the over-arching humanistic tone of this text.

One of the great strengths of Lancy’s text is its readability, particularly its clear and fluid prose. Lancy states that in order to not discourage the uninitiated, he purposefully eschews theoretical complexity. As a discipline cultural anthropology has moved beyond the reading of culture as that which creates variation upon a fixed biological given. Thus he states “[M]uch of this book is about the interplay of biology and culture. It is my fond hope that readers will discover aspects of childhood influenced profoundly by biology which they assumed were all about “nurture” and visa versa” (2008: 8). Yet in seeking to tear down traditional barriers, Lancy does not signal to the reader that the interplay between biology and culture remain problematic in the complex theoretical terrain of more difficult writers, such as Butler and Strathern. This omission is troubling.

I also wished Lancy would engage more with the question that prompts his book, “why haven’t anthropologists engaged with childhood?” There is little discussion of the difficulty of finding children in the archaeological record and scant consideration of the methodological difficulties when conducting ethnographic research with children. Beyond a brief engagement with Mead and colleagues in the preface, not much attention is given to the theoretical trajectory taken by anthropologists working on childhood over the last century. Surely one of the central reasons for the discipline’s relative lack of engagement with children is the disinterest in woman and the domestic that marked the early days of anthropological fieldwork? He presents the historical trajectory well (for instance of the European demographic transition) but perhaps neglects the transitions within our own discipline.

Lancy’s hope is that this book “should serve as a catalyst that promotes greater interaction among those who study childhood” (2008: ix). It is an impressive text and a significant contribution to the field. This work and Lancy’s broader oeuvre are central to igniting a renewed interest in childhood within anthropology and to prompting important questions about how holistic approaches to major problem foci should ultimately mature.

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